Why School Administrators Need to Know About Distance Learning: A College Professor's Perspective

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As a college professor who uses distance media to provide graduate education to teachers and school administrators, I sometimes encounter principals and assistant principals who are adamant that an understanding of technology and distance learning should not fall under their responsibilities. Besides the obvious - that they can take advantage of conveniently delivered courses themselves - how else can distance learning benefit school administrators? This article discusses the reasons why distance learning should be a necessary part of a university's Educational Leadership program.

Knowledge

At a minimum, school administrators should understand the basic technologies that they are asking their staff to utilize and their students to learn. A distance learning program that requires various technology competencies is one way that administrators may gain valuable hands on experience. At the State University of West Georgia, the Specialist and Masters in Education Leadership uses both two-way videoconferencing classes and online components to serve both the dual responsibility of providing content and facilitating technology experience.

In addition to the basic technology competencies gained through the use of distance learning technologies, may also gain a more thorough understanding of the difficulties their staff and students may face if working with substandard equipment or support. Undoubtedly the administrators' personal experiences will make them better equipped to ask the right questions when it is time to prepare for technology planning.

This first hand experience can also best illustrate how videoconferencing, the Internet, computer-based learning and other technologies can most effectively be used to enhance their schools' traditional curriculum and improve learning outcomes. As an administrator, it is paramount that one understand under what circumstances education technology can be least or most cost-effective and actually improve learning. As a 1998 study by the Milken Exchange has shown, what's most important is how education technology is used:

> "Eighth graders whose teachers used computers mostly for "simulations and applications"--generally associated with higher-order thinking--performed better on NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress, US Department of Education) than students whose teachers did not. Meanwhile, 8th graders whose teachers used computers primarily for "drill and practice"--generally associated with lower-order thinking--performed worse …… students whose teachers had professional development in computers outperformed students whose teachers didn't (Trotter, 1998)."

Leadership

Since the role of the school administrator is that of expedition guide - to organize, facilitate, deploy, and rescue - school administrators hold a pivotal role in influencing teachers' perception of technology. Feedback from school administrators leading teachers in technology-enhanced education may provide the very support needed to overcome a natural resistance resulting from technophobia. While some teachers approaching retirement may never welcome new technology, principals who are experienced with distance learning and other technologies can provide the impetus for positive change when they identify and support those who do aggressively pursue innovation (Mageau, 1994).

George and Sleeth (1996) noted that resistance to technology might be the result of feeling under-skilled or anticipating a loss of control. In my own experience, our students' resistance dramatically decreased as their confidence in their ability rose. These school superintendents, building principals and assistants, will best serve their teaching faculties when they are fully acclimated to the technologies themselves. Through their own understanding of and experience with distance education, they can provide a climate that rewards the use of technology as a strategic asset for the school and its learners.

In the larger picture, administrators who swivel from their desk to the computer to email their faculty or participate on an internet-based bulletin board are certainly more likely to support district, state and national distance learning and technology initiatives. Thus, their support of technology will ultimately effect teachers and the lives of children everywhere who must increasingly prepare for a global marketplace. Administrators need to ensure that all students are provided the same advantages. Eventually, the wall of fear will disintegrate as school administrators entice and encourage faculty personalities into the amazing world of technology and assist in demystifying the uncomfortable vagaries attending the emerging computer age.

Opportunities

In my class one extraordinary student has excelled - a teacher who is deaf. At a remote site two interpreters must take turns signing during the distance class which is broadcast live over two-way video. It is when the class turns to the Internet for discussion of issues that this unique student invites us into her world; when interacting on the bulletin board or chat rooms, she is thrilled that she need not rely on anyone else to speak her mind. She has been our guide, leading us on an adventurous technological journey. Through this experience as distance learners, school administrators have not only become well versed with the Internet and interactive application tools, but have developed a first-hand appreciation for the unique advantages afforded the physically challenged through technology.

Students are also amazed that the online course tools they access from home don't put them 'at a distance' at all. Through these classes, future administrators are learning how the level of one-on-one interaction and feedback can actually be increased by the use of bulletin boards where every student has an equal opportunity to be heard without the time constraints of a traditional classroom. Likewise, students also witness the strain that the shear volume of interaction may place on a professor, if efficient class management techniques are not utilized.

Conclusion

> "At first light on June 8, two other members of the 1924 British team, George Leigh
> Mallory and Andrew Irvine, departed the highest camp for the top [of MT. Everest].
> Mallory, whose name is inextricably linked to Everest, was the driving force behind
> the first three expeditions to the peak. While on a lantern-slide tour of the United
> States, it was he who so notoriously quipped, 'Because it is there' when an irritating
> newspaperman demanded to know why he wanted to climb Everest." (Krakauer,
> 1997)

Three years ago I trekked Nepal's Annapurna Himal and Everest ranges, pausing at the mountain
village schools to visit with the local school administrators (Wenzel, 1998); it occurred to me
that the teachers and administrators of these rudimentary schools need not be handicapped by
remoteness. Imagine teachers two hours from the nearest university driving a few minutes to the
local high school to take a school business management videoconferencing course, or gaining
on-line course access from the family or work computer. This is happening now for many
teachers and administrator aspirants. Now imagine teachers in Nepal trekking to the local Nepali
village school to take that same school business management course from the same professor.

"Why not?" is an aptly heard reply in Nepal to most any question. If school administrators will
lead the way for teachers, the future of distance learning, and its positive impact on connecting
global learners will make a difference for all learners. "Because it is there!" -- distance learning
and its promise for the twenty-first century may significantly transform traditional classroom
schooling; tomorrow's administrators should be prepared.

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